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DISCOURSE

DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE

NATIONAL FAST

SEPTEMBER 26TH 1861

IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN PHILADELPHIA

BY

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MINISTER

"Take counsel, execute judgment; make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts; betray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler: for the extortioner is at an end, the spoiler ceaseth, the oppressors are consumed out of the land."—ISAIAH, xvi., 3, 4.

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DISCOURSE

ISAIAH LVIII. 6.

"IS NOT THIS THE FAST THAT I HAVE CHOSEN? TO UNDO THE HEAVY BURDENS AND TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, AND THAT YE BREAK EVERY YOKE."

THE great trouble which has come upon this nation, and which gathers so many of the people of the loyal States of the Union in their Churches this day, suddenly as it seemed to break upon us, was not wholly unforeseen.

For the precise form which it has taken, there were, up to the very moment when it burst forth, but very few who were at all prepared. The threats that had been coming to us from the South with steadily increasing ferocity for years, and which should have prepared us for what has occurred, had, like the cry of wolf in the fable, been so often repeated, that they made very little impression on the Northern mind. They were regarded as empty words, uttered only for effect, and, like so much that had come from the same quarter, intended only to intimidate us into new concessions, and as no further serious.

Besides, it was beyond the power of our imagina-

tion, to conceive it possible that any human beings, who were not utterly bereft of reason, to say nothing of common human feeling, could dream of putting threats so insane into execution. It is only of late, and after the trouble had begun, that we have discovered that the Southern leaders had all along secretly renounced every principle of common sense and common honor, and were really resolved to perpetrate this most monstrous and most criminal folly. But before we had the evidence which has been furnished us in such abundance, of the sincerity of their threats in the violent plunder of the property of the nation, we could not, I repeat, believe that they could be so blind and depraved. Accordingly, as I have said, the precise form which the trouble has taken, namely, a Revolt of the Slave States, cannot be said to have been looked for. To my mind, I confess, it seemed far more likely, although nothing of this sort seemed very probable, that serious difficulties menacing the Union of these States might, sooner or later, arise from a withdrawal of the Free States from a partnership which involved them in the guilt of supporting Slavery.

But although the shape which the great calamity of Disunion has actually taken was not clearly foreseen by scarcely any, yet that it would surely come, in one shape or another, sooner or later, there has been a foreboding in the minds of the people almost

from the very beginning of this nation. At the very first, objections were made to the Constitution formed for these United States, and in the North there was opposition to its adoption, because it recognized Slavery as a local institution and provided for the return of Fugitive Slaves to their masters; because, in fact, there were those who dreaded the evils that must ensue from the slightest countenance given to such a manifest violation of natural justice. But all objections on this score were overcome, and the prophetic apprehension of danger was allayed, partly by the fact that Slavery seemed to be dying out of one State after another, and partly by the prohibition, contained in the Constitution, of the Foreign Slave trade after the lapse of the first twenty years. By this prohibition, implied in the declaration that the Federal Government should not interfere with the foreign traffic in human flesh before the year 1808, intimating its full authority to interfere with it after that time, our fathers honestly believed that they had dealt the barbarous institution its death blow, and to use the words of one of them, that Slavery was thus doomed "to die of consumption." They did not perceive the deadly peril that lay in allowing to so monstrous a wrong a legal existence, even for only so brief a term as twenty years. They flattered themselves that it would, in the sure prospect of the near day when its supply from abroad would cease, busily employ that period

in abolishing itself; as if any institution, which gratifies, and so strengthens, the love of power and the self-indulgent passions of men, would do otherwise than grow and keep growing every moment its existence is prolonged, whatever restrictions might threaten it in the future. The idea that Slavery would come to an end in this way was as fallacious as it would be to expect a man, who is contracting a habit of drinking to excess, to enter upon a course of reformation, upon being assured that a year or two hence no intoxicating drink would be allowed him.

Accordingly, as the history of the country shows, Slavery, instead of wasting away in view of the hour when its foreign supply should cease, used the term that was granted it, to create for itself new sources of strength. And it soon became evident that, instead of having received its death blow, it had received a new lease of life, and had discovered that, when it could no longer steal its victims in Africa, it might breed them at home.

As the fact became manifest that, instead of dying, it was living on, every year more and more vigorously, and that, from some seven hundred and fifty thousand in number at the time the Constitution was formed, the slave population on our soil was swelling to millions, there was every where in the minds of the people a foreboding of the evil that must come of it. For years they did not dare to look that

way. In private they whispered their fears to one another. Not a loud word was spoken. Or, if allusion was publicly made to Slavery, it was to deplore the curse but not to confess the wrong. So far as the apprehensions that were felt took shape, the thing that has been specially looked for and most generally dreaded, was a terrible Slave insurrection, a bloody servile war. It was this that Mr. Jefferson was evidently thinking of, when he said that he trembled for his country, when he thought of the Justice of Heaven, for God, he said also, had no attribute that could take sides with the masters. That the proverbial horrors of St. Domingo were one day or another to be repeated here on a stupendous scale, was the appalling thought most widely prevalent. But the very indefiniteness of the prophetic dread which seized the minds of thoughtful men in view of this portentous subject, only deepened its terrible impression.

To such gigantic proportions of terror and darkness was the Evil seen to be steadily growing, that to the wisest and the boldest it seemed like an inexorable Fate coming towards us, against which all mortal strength would prove utterly powerless. Hence, for half a century, as its awful shadow spread and deepened over the land, men fell silent and shut their eyes to it, under the delusive idea that if no public attention were called to it, it would be the same as if the terrible evil did not exist; and whole generations have been educated to entertain this thinnest and

most obvious of delusions and to act upon it, as if it were one of the soundest principles of action and of thought. The very readiness with which the people acquiesced in this mode of dealing with the subject, taking shelter under such an ostrich-like subterfuge, only shows that it had spread out to such terrible dimensions as to baffle the grasp and overpower the strength of their reasoning faculties,—only shows how vast and deep was the evil which it foreboded in the minds of men.

But although the people at large were thus appalled and gradually hardened into inaction and silence, it was not possible in the nature of things that the silence should last forever. It was not possible that it could be long maintained far into an age like the present, an age in which, as never before, man is awakening to a sense of the sacredness of human nature and to a consciousness of his power. Now when we are learning to be interested in human beings, not on account of the accidents of birth and rank and beauty and wealth, but simply because they are human beings; now too, when the spirit that is in man is triumphing over the mightiest material obstacles, and nothing seems too arduous for him to undertake, it could not be that a whole busy, energetic nation like this should remain forever dumb in the presence of so portentous an evil as this institution of human bondage. Nay, putting out of view

all the stirring features of the age, it was not possible for men, made, as we are made, to recognize the sacred claims of natural justice, and to feel for the suffering and the injured,—it was not possible that they should be forever kept from speaking out against an established wrong that bore so threatening an aspect.

Accordingly, after fifty years of silence, a few humble and earnest voices were heard speaking aloud, denouncing the great violation of the Law of Right which the nation was allowing, and warning the people of the deadly peril which was growing every moment that this violation was persisted in. At the sound of those voices, publicly declaring what every man knew and could not help knowing in his heart to be true, the whole country was thrown into a state of the greatest consternation and rage. A price was instantly put upon the head of the man who first had the courage to say aloud, that we were breaking the Eternal Law. I will not pause here to praise the valor and the faith of those who were the first to break the awful silence of the nation. I will only say, that, noble and heartstirring as are the instances which we now witness of a generous love of country, there are, at this hour, no purer or more devoted patriots than was the little company of men and women, through whom the Freedom and the Justice, which alone can save this people from

the woe and ruin with which the Slave power has always threatened us, first found a voice. I will make no further claim for them now, nor will I dwell upon this, because it seems to me, that if they had not spoken boldly out in condemnation of the great wrong which we were upholding and in warning of the danger which menaced us, the very stones of the streets would have cried out. In the demand which was made for an instant cessation from the great sin of the nation I hear not so much the voices of private individuals, as the mighty and irrepressible voice of Nature,—of Almighty God himself. It could not be,—it was impossible, that the hour should not come when the cry of outraged Humanity would be heard, startling the nation out of its dreadful sleep. It lay not in the will of man, but in the unchangeable nature of things, that this voice must be heard. Those through whom it spake did not chose it, it chose them. And as the word came to them, they had to give it utterance or die. A storm of violence and abuse instantly broke upon their devoted heads. They were ridiculed, reviled, mobbed, put to death; every avenue to popular favor was closed against them. All which shows most convincingly how much the nation stood in fear of the institution of Slavery; what a foreboding there was in the secret hearts and consciences of the people of the evil that must flow from it, and which they idly

thought to postpone by never saying a loud word about it, vaguely trusting that in some inconceivable way Providence would some day interpose to relieve our soil of this dreaded curse.

The object of those who, at so much personal risk, sought to awaken the country to its peril, was to adjure it to return to the paths of Righteousness which alone are the paths of security and peace; and not a few are they whom they have enlisted in their cause. We, my friends, can never forget how heartily he became interested in the Anti-slavery movement, who, in his day, was by far the most able and eloquent representative of liberal Christianity in this country and in this age, William Ellery Channing; and nothing that he ever did was a worthier or more consistent illustration of the simple faith of which he was the most distinguished advocate, than his labors in behalf of Freedom and Humanity, terminating only with his life.

But the most decisive effect of the Anti-slavery movement has been to drive the Slave power to show itself undisguised, to lay itself bare in all its malignity and barbarism, which it has done by a series of outrages, each more atrocious than its predecessor, and culminating at last as it has done in this wicked and savage rebellion. The advocates of Freedom, in their denunciations of Slave institutions, have always been charged with dealing in too violent language

They have been stigmatised as abusive and slanderous. And yet who that sees, and who that has eyes can help seeing, what the Slave power is doing at this moment, can find terms of reprobation strong enough adequately to characterise its inhuman and barbarous character? If at times the language used against it seemed too strong, that language was hardly uttered before there came tidings of some new outrage perpetrated by it that more than justified the burning words that had been hurled against it, that indeed made those words cold. Indeed it has again and again seemed as if this evil power were forced by a resistless destiny to vindicate the veracity of those who have denounced it, to prove by trampling in the dust, as it has done, the most sacred claims of Honor and of Humanity that the worst that was said of it was true.

But however this may be, whether the language in which the giant wrong of the country and the day has been spoken of, have been justifiable or not, one thing is plain: for the last five-and-twenty years the people have been learning to see more and more clearly what a foaming fountain of insecurity and alarm, of violence and crime and blood, the institution of Slavery is. What, from an early period, has been a deep but vague presentiment in their minds; what caused Jefferson to tremble for his country; what made Pinckney say, that if Slavery lasted fifty

years it would extinguish the spirit, the life of liberty in the nation,—this prophetic dread of trouble to come, has slowly ripened into assured knowledge. What was long ago more or less dimly foreseen is now palpable. And no man now can fail to see that Slavery bears bitter and deadly fruit. What misery and ruin it produces is no longer a matter of doubtful prophecy, it is not, as has been so often charged, the wild dream of harebrained fanatics, it is spread out now and shown before all eyes, in the unhappy state of the country, "shining o'er with civil swords," in the ruthless plunder of the national property, in a beleaguered capitol, in whole tracts of country laid waste and desolate, in women and children fleeing for life from their burning homes, in the blood of noble and brave men poured out in battle, in the tears of the widow and the orphan, in the heavy weight of anxious care which now burdens all hearts, and in the energies of our young men forced away from all the honorable pursuits of peace and driven to study the bloody arts of violence and destruction.

But although no man can fail now to perceive the relation of cause and effect, between the Slave power and the present most painful condition of the country, still it is not yet seen as it might, and as it must be seen, how direct and intimate and necessary this relation is. We do not yet appreciate, as we might,

the irrefragable logic by which it is inevitable that precisely such effects as we see had to follow from such a cause. So long as Slavery is suffered to exist, no power on earth or in heaven can avert the consequences of it, such as we are now suffering.

We have been accustomed to look upon this flagrant wrong mainly, if not solely, in its cruel influence upon those who are its first and most obvious victims, that is, upon the slaves; and we have treated it as if it were to be condemned merely on the score of humanity to them. We have not yet fully learned that the deadliest injury by far which it works is the injury which it does to the oppressor and to all who connive at his oppression. We have yet to learn,—the lesson is written out for us now upon the land in characters of blood,—we have yet to learn that he who injures a brother man inflicts a greater injury upon himself in the very act. Because it is at the cost of denying and depraving his own better nature that any man commits injustice and inhumanity. He has to wound, mutilate and destroy the noblest part of him,—that in which he is made in the likeness of the Highest. He must stifle and sear his own conscience, that authority within him which forbids him to do to another what he would not have that other do to him. He must cut out his own heart with all its warm and throbbing sympathies and fling it from him.

This is as indubitable a truth as any 'rigid scientific fact.' It is impossible in the nature of things that it should be otherwise. And it is this fact which renders the continued existence of Slavery in this country so terrible. No one who has once caught sight of this fact can help laboring, as he has any concern for human well-being, any love for his country, to do all that in him lies to hasten its abolition. It has been steadily, and through the operation of the inexorable laws of our nature, demoralizing the people of this land. It has been eating out of their hearts those feelings of humanity which distinguish and ennoble the human species, the sacred sense of Justice, of Honor and of Liberty. In the place of that human respect which is as vital to human happiness as the air, it has breathed contempt and pride and cruelty into the bosoms of both men and women. It has given the reins to every base passion. Even if every story of extraordinary severity in the treatment of the oppressed were conceded to be false, it would nevertheless remain true that the buying and selling of human beings as beasts of burden, the bare denial of their right to themselves, and of their domestic and conjugal relations, the requiring them to labor without wages, and the withholding from them the means of that education which is the God-inspired demand of their nature, must cost those who do them these wrongs a fatal moral loss. We

cannot thus unjustly treat others, though we feed and clothe them and treat them never so humanely in all other respects, but at the expense of the most sacred feelings and sympathies of our own nature.

To what a fearful extent the moral ravages, thus committed by oppression in this land, have been carried, we have overwhelming evidence in the present condition of things. And this savage Southern outbreak is the natural and necessary offspring of Slavery. Even if we did not know what institutions existed at the South, we should be compelled to infer, from the barbarous character of this rebellion, that its instigators must have been specially trained in habits of trampling upon the sacred claims of humanity. It is a rebellion unprecedented in the annals of the world. For every other assault upon an established government recorded in history, there has been the excuse of some injustice suffered, of some grievance demanding redress; but in the present instance it is the love of despotic power, the alleged right to treat human beings as brutes and chattels, which, under the fear of a threatened restriction upon its exercise, has driven the men of the South to undertake the overthrow of the freest government ever yet established among men. In this respect it stands alone in its enormity. Not from the faintest breath of Freedom does it derive its savage life, but it is the inordinate love of selfish power from which comes all its

inspiration, and which, only so long as it was able to secure its gratification by political management and party corruption and so rule the country, was content to refrain from openly seizing the property and shedding the blood of the nation.

One would think that the imposing demonstration of the barbarism of slave institutions that is now spread out before us, must amply suffice to reveal to the blindest the more than iron chain of natural sequence connecting this ferocious onslaught upon our national existence with the oppression that we have fostered as its cause. But it does not yet seem to be sufficient. It is not yet distinctly seen by us all, as it must be, how indissolubly these two things are bound together in relation of cause and effect. For the sad truth is, and this is the sin which it becomes us this day to confess before God with the deepest humiliation,—the sad truth is, that the demoralization caused by the Slave power has not by any means been confined to the South. The North, which has abetted the oppression of our brother man, has been depraved by it also. Our moral perceptions have been blurred in like manner; our sense of justice and humanity has been blunted, our love of freedom most seriously impaired. And, accordingly, plain as the origin is of the present trouble, the general mind of the North flinches from the thought of it. We would still gladly ignore it,

for the work to which the distinct acknowledgment of it points us is a work hard and stern,—a work which only saints and martyrs and heroes can accomplish. That we in our weakness, clinging as we are to the fond hope of a speedy restoration of our shattered prosperity, shrink from attempting to grapple with the cause of our present calamity, I do not wonder; for it is an undertaking encompassed with fearful difficulties, a work which will require consummate prudence, unconquerable humanity, and a most religious faith. Arduous as it is, we must somehow or other screw our courage up and address ourselves to it, or we perish. It is become plain, by every token and sign of the times, that there is a terrible necessity laid upon this generation. Never was a people summoned to a higher duty; and hard as it may be, and formidable as are the obstacles in the way of its fulfilment, the work and its result will be transcendently glorious. And we have the great company of the departed servants of Liberty, who point to the dungeons and scaffolds and battlefields which they have glorified, 'the sacramental host of God's elect,' and the sympathies and prayers of all good men throughout the world, and the prophetic vision of generations disenthralled, and Almighty God himself, to breathe into us an invincible strength and cheer us onward to an assured and immortal victory. Let us, then, in the closing words of President Lincoln, "without

guile, and with pure purpose, renew our trust in God, and go forward without fear and with manly hearts." Then, then shall we be observing an acceptable Fast, a Fast not of human appointment, but of Heaven's own choosing. FOR IS NOT THIS THE FAST THAT I HAVE CHOSEN? SAITH THE LORD, THAT YE UNDO THE HEAVY BURTHENS, AND LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE.

NOTE.

Why should not the same "decent respect for the opinions of mankind," which, at an hour not more momentous than the present, prompted our fathers to publish a solemn Declaration of their principles, cause a similar Declaration to be put forth now by the Free States of the North, either through the voice of their chosen Executive, or by popular assemblies,—a Declaration which, commencing with a recognition of the self-evident connection between the present assault upon our national existence and the institution of Slavery, should assert the necessity of putting an end to Slavery, as imposed upon us alike by natural justice and humanity and by national safety? If the nation is to continue to exist, in one way or another Slavery must cease. The best method of abolishing it, now left to us, will require the united action of the North and the South. For the first time in the history of the country, concessions must be made, not to the South, but by it. The South must submit to the national authority. The buying and selling of human beings must instantly cease. There must no longer be any unpaid labor. Then let the North, with its pre-eminent constructive skill, set to work so to organize the labor of those

now held in bondage that all classes shall be benefited thereby, employing force, if necessary, for a time, to keep the laborers at work and prevent violence. If men at a great expense can be marshalled to destroy, so can they certainly at a like expense be drilled to work, to the advantage of all. Then Abolition, so long dreaded as a curse, will soon show itself to be a blessing in the lowest commercial sense, a blessing of unimagined richness.

That such conditions, as are thus very briefly hinted at, being proposed by the North, would be acceded to by the South, no one regards as probable. Yet were they in good faith publicly set forth in such a Declaration as is proposed above, the cause of the Free States in the present struggle, strong as it already is, would be squarely placed before God and all good men upon an impregnable foundation, and a strength would come from it that would make every soldier in our ranks worth a thousand men. With such a cause, success is as sure as the rising of the sun. And the South will be forced, for its own sake as well as ours, to make the concessions above named. The existence of the African race upon our soil, 'instead of being a millstone about the neck of the nation,' will then be a stone of Ajax in her hand,—a means of power and wealth untold.

Deplorable will it be, if, when our people are rushing to confront shells and batteries, they should still be scared away from the great work by words, and fail to see that the obnoxious term Abolition is only another name for the splendid problem, namely, *To convert four millions of Slaves into Free Laborers:* a problem, which there is no nation on the face of the earth so peculiarly qualified by native genius to solve, as this American people.